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ABSTRACT

Despite the lengthy existence of the concept of lifelong learning, there is still no one generally accepted theory of education as a lifelong process. More than an extension of adult education, lifelong learning rests on the belief that learning occurs throughout life, in different ways and through different processes. The key notion in lifelong education is that all individuals ought to have a variety of organized and systematic opportunities for instruction, study, and learning at anytime throughout their lives. There are four key elements of lifelong learning. These are (1) horizontal integration (the concept that in-school education should be coordinated with other components of society in which learning occurs); (2) vertical integration (the principle that education should be highly integrated and interactive with events at various age levels); (3) lifelong learners, who are conscious of themselves as learners throughout life; and (4) a lifelong learning curriculum. A system organized according to the principle of lifelong education would be a quinary one involving early, elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and adult education. Professional adult education associations have a definite role in advocating the concept of lifelong learning at the state, regional, and national levels. (MN)

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TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFELONG LEARNING

By Roger S. McCannon

Introduction

Everywhere you look these days, in the professional literature (particularly in our field of adult education) you come across publications attempting to advance, clarify, enhance, implement, and support the notion of lifelong learning. However, in my mind confusion exists as to just what lifelong learning means, and I wonder if we really have a theoretical grasp on the concept in this country. Is lifelong learning the same as adult education--or is it something else? -- Something more! Although I do not want to get into a semantic battle over terminology--just listen to some of the terms we use under the rubric of lifelong learning: adult education, continuing education, part-time education, lifetime education, non-traditional study, recurrent education, extension education, community education, cooperative education, open learning, distance education, self-directed learning, outreach education and experiential learning. Do all these terms add up to lifelong learning? Well let's see! I hope I can bring us some understanding of lifelong learning, and then attempt to show how our professional associations at the state, regional and national levels can also help in this understanding.

Antecedents

The idea of education and learning as a lifelong process is by no means new. The basic notion can be seen in writings dating back to antiquity. In primitive societies education was complex and continual and it aimed at forming the character, aptitudes, skills and moral qualities of individuals who were educated through a kind of symbiotic process throughout life. The Greeks spoke of paedeia--a society and culture conceived as an environment for the lifelong growth of an individual. Socrates believed that the objective

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of education should be virtue, rather than immediate learning, Plato believed that the highest form of education should not only be for instruction and training but for fellowship as a way of life. The idea of lifelong education had also been given prominence by European educational theorists such as Comenius and Matthew Arnold. To Comenius, all knowledge was of a piece, and to know less than all was to have an incomplete awareness. More recently, a 1919 report to the British government by the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee specifically recommended that education should be lifelong as a matter of national importance. In this country, over 60 years ago, John Dewey expressed the view that education and learning are lifelong processes.

Current Developments

Today (as I mentioned earlier) we are now seeing a new wave of interest in the idea of lifelong learning. The 1972 report on the International Commission on the Development of Education published by UNESCO contained, as its very first recommendation for educational planners, the proposal that lifelong education should be adopted as the master concept for future educational innovation. Further, UNESCO adopted a full set of recommendations on the development of adult education at its nineteenth session on November 26, 1976, calling for a full integration between learning and living. The 1976 Wingspread Conference on "Lifelong Learning in the Public Interest" developed imperatives for policy and action in lifelong learning stressing that it is an evolving concept, and represents a new perspective or attitute toward learners and learning throughout the life-cycle. Currently, the College Entrance Examination Board's Project "Future Directions for a Learning Society" (funded by Exxon and Sears Roebuck) is attempting to develop consensus and support for the needs of participants and providers in a "learning society."

Definitions and Theories

Nonetheless, no general theory of education as a lifelong process has gained wide-spread acceptance in English language writing. A systematic educational theory is considerably more than the sum of its individual ideas, just as a chain is considerably more than a collection of its links. Even though there are scattered and fragmentary statements that emphasize the lifelong nature of learning, these have not been collected and organized into a unified theory of lifelong education.

Although the idea of lifelong learning has received considerable attention and has become widely known, examination of the literature suggests that it is not fully understood and that complete consensus concerning its nature, rationale and educational implications does not exist.

In an attempt to define lifelong learning, the Lifelong Learning Project of HEW (the operational mechanism for Title I-B of the Amendments to the 1976 Higher Education Act--"The Lifelong Learning Act") stated that:

> "There are many overlapping approaches to the concept of lifelong learning. Some stress the participation of adults in formal programs of study; others stress nonformal learning activities in the community or workplace. Some stress compensatory programs aimed at reaching those who have had little or no secondary schooling. Others emphasize vocational training. Still others, recognizing the stresses of modern life, emphasize programs that address self-development and coping skills. The broadest view of lifelong learning is one that proposes reshaping both formal and informal learning opportunities so that they meet the needs of individuals at each stage of the life cycle."

To some extent the label lifelong education is self-explanatory, however, it is important to distinguish it from the more traditional process of adult education. A great deal more is implied by the notion of lifelong education than extension of adult education to a wider audience or the provision of more upgrading classes for workers who are barred from further

advancement in their jobs by inadequate skills. I believe that outside of our field, adult education is still conceptualized as either recreation or else something which ought to be undertaken by those who need to compensate for earlier shortcomings. Thus it is stigmatized as being either a luxury or else remedial, rather than being regarded as the normal part of an ongoing process of education throughout life. A lifelong education-oriented system would in fact subsume adult education as it currently exists and would simultaneously break down the distinction between adult education and other levels of education.

Lifelong education rests on the belief that learning occurs throughout life, in different ways and through different processes (and I might add--for different individuals--as reported by the work of Allen Tough and others). The key notion in lifelong education is that all individuals ought to have a variety of organized and systematic opportunities for instruction, study and learning at anytime throughout their lives; literally from cradle to grave. Now, I don't have to tell you these things--as adult educators you are already aware of them. However, if we accept these beliefs and notions then it behooves us to look at their implications. What this means, generally, is that we must view learning as a lifelong process and understand the key elements that form the basis of a conceptual framework for lifelong education. A.J. Cropley, of the University of Regina and George W. Parkyn of the University of London have identified four such key elements in their work for UNESCO.

Elements of Lifelong Learning

The first key element is that of horizontal integration. Horizontal integration means that education, in the sense of school learning, should be coordinated with other components of society in which learning occurs. We would then accept that, not only would learning take place formally in schools,

but also at home, in the work place, in libraries and museums, through study clubs and travel and generally through a whole host of informal means.

The second key element of the lifelong learning process is the principle of vertical integration. Vertical integration means that education is seen as highly integrated and interactive with events at various age levels, so that learning is partially determined by events at earlier ages and also partly determined by those in the future. Vertical integration is also longitudinal in character, i.e., over one's lifetime. I think we already accept this, as we believe, for example, that secondary education is influenced by elementary education, but we haven't concluded that adult education influences secondary or post-secondary education.

The third key element is that of the lifelong learner. Lifelong learners are individuals who are conscious of themselves as learners throughout life. They see new learning as a logical way to handle problems, are highly motivated to carry on learning at all age levels, and welcome change and challenge throughout life which provides opportunities for new learning.

The fourth and final key element is that of a lifelong learning curriculum. A lifelong learning curriculum is the practical means through which the results can be achieved. This means that the task facing curriculum developers is to design a curriculum which implements the principles of lifelong education. Such a curriculum would undoubtedly build upon a model different from the tertiary educational model currently found in this country. Our current tertiary (three-fold) educational structure separates elementary, secondary and post-secondary education into three separate systems. If one were to initiate a lifelong learning model, it would mean a reorganization of the basic system of education and the development of new components in that system. Indeed, UNESCO has denoted

that lifelong education calls for restructuring the existing education system.

Quinary System of Education

A system organized according to the principle of lifelong education would not cause lifelong learning but it would involve a deliberate attempt to influence the form, degree and quality of that learning by recognizing the four key elements that I cited; horizontal integration, vertical integration, lifelong learners and a lifelong learning curriculum. A new system could then be developed which would replace the tertiary system under which we now operate. I would call it a quinary (five-fold) system of education. As I see it, there would be five components of such a quinary system, including:

1. Early Education (up to and including pre-school)
2. Elementary Education
3. Secondary Education
4. Post-Secondary Education
5. Adult Education

By advocating such a system, we as adult educators would truly be taking a leadership role in developing a better conceptual understanding of lifelong learning based upon a sound philosophical theory. We could then solder together the links of the theoretical chain into a systematic educational theory for lifelong education.

Association's Roles

I see a definite role for our professional adult education associations, at the state, regional and national levels, to advocate the concept of lifelong learning. I believe our associations are dedicated to fostering the development of the field of adult education and to the enhancement of the professional development of our members. I feel our associations can provide the eclectic forums necessary to carry out the further discussions on the concepts of life-long learning. Since our memberships already represent the wide range of the

diversity of our field, our conferences and our publications are a logical place where our professionals, representing both formal and informal educational providers, can come together to debate, discuss, and refine the components of a lifelong learning educational system.

I firmly believe that, if in this country, we can develop a better conceptual understanding of lifelong learning, then adult education can truly become the capstone learning experience and maybe--just maybe--our field can be the tail that wags the educational dog.

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